

BOOKS

MODERN
HOUSE THREE

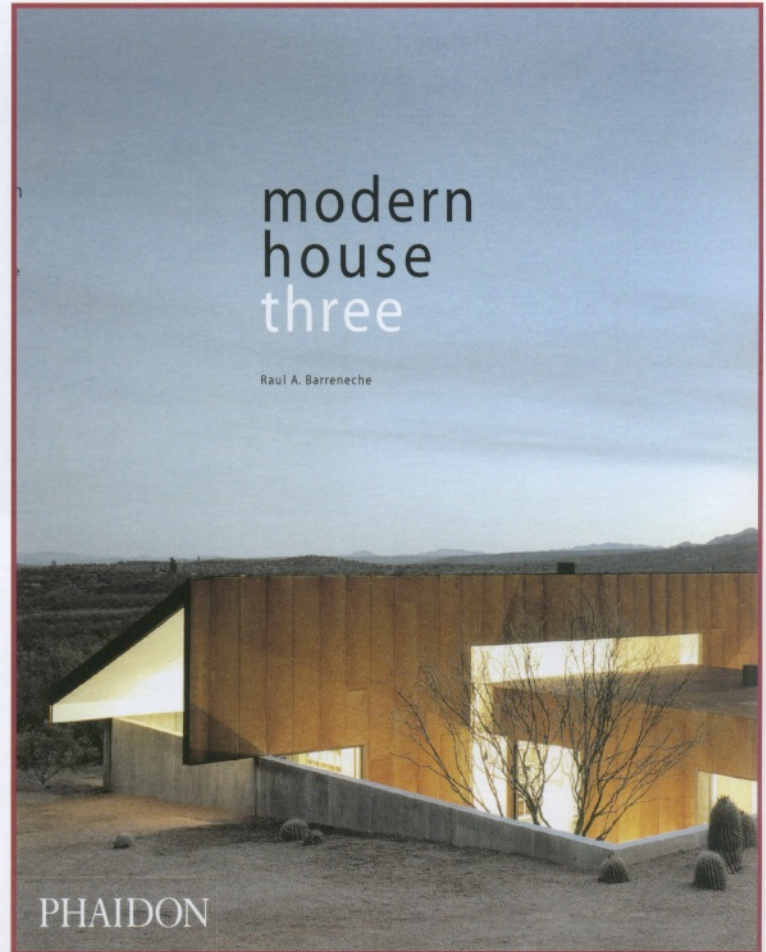
Raul A. Barreneche

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This is now the third book in the series 'modern house' by Phaidon. Not surprisingly it follows the same format as the earlier books: a pictorial survey of International contemporary houses threaded together with some connecting text. While the first book usefully brought together several lesser-known projects with more famous iconic houses; the second aimed to explore new housing ideas and trends; 'modern house three' has opted for a blander and more anonymous picture book approach.

While all three books in this series have been compiled and edited by architectural journalists, this third volume reveals a cut and paste urgency to publish, rather than an in-depth investigation or search for what is a modern house? Barreneche—who has worked on several American journals and newspapers—defines three loose thematic structures within which the thirty-four (publisher states thirty three) houses are grouped: 'merging inside and out'; 'reimagining the program' and 'materials, craft and technology'. After a short initial essay called 'the lure of the modern house'—which mystifyingly refers to Zaha Hadid as 'an old guard architect'—these themes are fleetingly introduced on a single page. Many of these houses are curiously placed in these categories and could be easily interchangeable. Several suffer from that ever-present media side effect: overexposure, such as the 'Straw Bale House' by Sarah Wigglesworth architects, that is becoming almost painfully inescapable in any book on new houses.

Right / Weiss House,
Steven Harris Architect,
photo by Steven Harris Architect



"While there are the usual array of stunning photographs, sublime sites and unimaginable budgets, few of these houses truly reflect the wide diversity of ideas and developments taking place in society and contemporary architecture."

While there are the usual array of stunning photographs, sublime sites and unimaginable budgets, few of these houses truly reflect the wide

diversity of ideas and developments taking place in society and contemporary architecture. How do we relate to, or evaluate our contemporary homes? How can we compare a concrete house in Argentina with a wooden cabin in the bush in Australia? What does it mean to have a second home?

It seems 'martini modernism' has become a safe haven to aspire to and fills out the pages of this book. There are of course some notable exceptions: Rick Joy's 'Tubac House' deep in the Arizona desert, the wonderful low budget 'Zigzag cabin'—designed and built—by Drew Heath in Australia, and the geometrically ▶





Left / Zerlauth House,
ArchitekturBuro D.
I Hermann Kaufmann,
photo by Bruno Klomfar

► imaginative 'Small House' by Kazuyo Sejima in Tokyo. These projects demonstrate a sense of place with an inventive architectural craft. They are also inspiring and fresh.

Perhaps choosing fewer houses and expanding the information would have been a better idea. The tendency in a 'picture book' such as this, to

crop and isolate the houses from their geographic, cultural, technical, and social context, drains them of most of their qualities. A useful comparison is with Birkhäuser's in DETAIL 'Single Family Houses' which shows sixteen houses in considerable detail and packs in a number of excellent essays discussing the history and origins of the dwelling by several different authors.

So what other information might have been given? Some of the houses shown are almost seven years old. So what has it been like to inhabit them? Who are the people that have commissioned them? Are there other ways to describe life in a modern house? What makes them modern?

Most of the houses are shown ghost-like unoccupied; the token open book; the bowl of fruit and the strangely lit fire in summer hint that there might indeed by some life in there. Barreneche has in the past written for the excellent American magazine DWELL, that by contrast fleshes out the people and lifestyle of those who enjoy inhabiting modern houses.

This third volume of 'modern house' exposes a need for a change of editorial direction. Not least to ask exactly who this book is aimed at? Phaidon should drop the overt coffee book polish in favour of content and reflect the rougher edges of contemporary life and architecture. Phaidon's 10 x 10 and now 10 . 10_2 series are much more successful, dense, visual compendiums of

contemporary work. If this series is to continue and build on the much better earlier volumes then there is some serious (modern) housework to be done. ●

Paul Clarke

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By Raul A. Barreneche

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Above / Sobek House, Werner Sobek, photo by Roland Halbe